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Beyond Biopolitics: Reading Bolaño's Human Fragments

Paul Merchant

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared [...] then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

– Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (422)

The fiction of Roberto Bolaño is filled with images of bodies *in extremis*: in situations of violence, sexual activity, illness and death. While bodily experience in Bolaño's work has not received significant critical attention, some of these bodies have achieved paradigmatic status, particularly among those critics who draw out the biopolitical implications of his writing. Chief among these are the corpses of the murdered women in Santa Teresa that litter the pages of 'La parte de los crímenes' in the posthumous novel 2666. Many critical accounts of this section of the novel view the corpses as evidence of the deadly power of the neoliberal order.¹ These biopolitical readings of Bolaño's work are undoubtedly of value, and cannot be disregarded. Nonetheless, what follows here is born of a suspicion that the bodies in Bolaño's fiction provide, at best, precarious conduits for biopolitical reflection. Following the influential definition of biopolitics proposed by Michel Foucault, as 'the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power' (*History of Sexuality* 141), I will suggest that Bolaño in fact demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining the body within any order, and particularly within that of representation.²

1 See Deckard, Farred and Franco for examples of this approach.

2 As Thomas Lemke makes clear in his introduction to the topic, 'biopolitics' has been the subject of many other theorisations since Foucault. I will focus here on the models offered by Foucault and by Giorgio Agamben, as these appear to have had the most significant influence in studies of Latin American culture (for instance in the work of Gareth Williams).

Images of the body in Bolaño's fiction are frequently fractured and fragmented, as Patricia Espinosa has noted (*Territorios* 24), or are described in the language of the spectral and supernatural (Deckard 355). This article will suggest that this frailty and fragmentation have profound implications for the relationship between body and meaning in Bolaño's fiction, calling into question how the body might function as a sign or be 'read' in literature. Bodily imagery is, moreover, shown to have dangerous political potential. My analysis of these problems will focus on the face, as the site where they are most insistently posed. The work of Emmanuel Levinas and Gilles Deleuze will provide useful contexts for a discussion of the face's difficult relation to human experience, after which, following the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, I will argue that unclear or fragmentary human figures in Bolaño's fiction point towards the dissolution of the human as a representable category, at least in the sense developed by the Christian humanist tradition. This movement is most obvious in *2666*, but can be perceived in earlier novels such as *Estrella distante* and *Nocturno de Chile* which will also be discussed here. When the human is barely visible, the grounds for biopolitical interpretation seem rather shaky.

Fragmentary Readings: Bodily Illegibility

Why, and how, might one 'read' a body? Bolaño's equivocal appeal to the genre of detective fiction in 'La parte de los crímenes' in *2666* poses the question. It is notable that whenever potential 'clues' are identified on the bodies of the female factory workers of Santa Teresa, such as a skirt put on backwards (567) or an amputated breast and torn-off nipple (584 *et passim*), no deductions are ever successfully made. These marks of bodily violence fail to function as legible signs. Indeed, for Espinosa, there is no secret in the bodies but merely a 'simulacro', the secret reimagined as 'indeterminación' ('Secreto y simulacro').

This is not the only instance where bodily fragments offer Bolaño's characters the tantalising prospect of meaning: in same novel, Oscar Fate has a hunch that the murders of the women contain 'el secreto del mundo' (439). This particular phrase has, it seems, led critics of the novel to ascribe various meanings to the corpses: for Ángeles Donoso Macaya, 'son signo(s) de inseguridad, de injusticia, de violencia' (135), and for Grant Farred the secret which they hide is the presence of death 'as a brutal, inexplicable, fact of the neoliberal postcolonial state' (692). There is certainly evidence in the novel to support such biopolitical (or 'necropolitical', as Farred (691) has it) readings. One of the *maquiladoras* (factories along the Mexico-US

border) in Santa Teresa is, for example, likened to a pyramid 'con su altar de los sacrificios oculto detrás de las chimeneas', suggesting that death is an inevitable, in-built part of the neoliberal economy (2666 564). It is, however, worth noting as an aside that the 'altar' of this metaphor also points beyond economics: I will suggest below that notions of the sacred play an important role in Bolaño's (de)construction of bodily images. The story of Edwin Johns, recounted in 2666's 'La parte de los críticos', might also be interpreted along biopolitical lines. The critics are desperate to know why Johns, a painter, cut off his own hand and included it in one of his artworks. The answer they eventually receive is that he did it for money, 'Porque creía en las inversiones, el flujo de capital' (132). This explanation seemingly ties capitalist society to bodily fragmentation.

The line of argument I will adopt here is nonetheless predicated on a conviction that it is not sufficient simply to read these fragments as parts of a grand metaphorical or allegorical system. Indeed, Ignacio López-Vicuña, among others, has noted how Bolaño sets up literature and practices of signification as 'violence's intimate reverse', rather than an act of '(humanistic) resistance' (156). There is plenty of evidence for this view: in *Estrella distante*, for instance, Diego Soto's poetry workshop is located in the Faculty of Medicine, next to the room where 'los estudiantes despiezaban cadáveres' (20), and in *Nocturno de Chile* María Canales' literary soirées take place in the house where her husband tortures people for Pinochet's regime. I would nonetheless argue that this does not preclude the possibility of reading Bolaño's work as an attempt at constructing a literature *after* or *from* violence, and even perhaps as evincing a kind of (fragmented) humanism. In *Nocturno de Chile*, the priest narrator Urrutia Lacroix justifies his account of literary complicity with state violence by declaring: 'Así se hace la literatura en Chile' (148). Yet he finds this assertion challenged by the 'joven envejecido', a mysterious figure who can be seen as a bodily manifestation of Urrutia Lacroix's conscience, or perhaps a version of Bolaño (Fandiño 405).³ This character, 'lo que queda de él, mueve los labios formulando un *no* inaudible' (*Nocturno* 148). The suggestion that there might be another way of creating literature is scarcely articulated and comes from an incomplete human figure, but it is articulated nonetheless, at the very limits of visibility. This is a good example of how, according to Espinosa, Bolaño's work offers 'la fragmentación como único sitio posible' (*Territorios* 23), as if the complete image of the body were too vulnerable to political appropriation.

The imagery of bodily fragmentation is in fact extended to the fabric of the

3 The importance of the double in Bolaño's fiction, which cannot fully be addressed here, has received significant critical attention. See, for example, Gamboa Cárdenas in relation to *Estrella distante*.

exterior world in Bolaño's fiction: in 2666, Oscar Fate's comparison of clouds with tumours suggests the dissolution of the human figure (383), whether as physical subject or body politic. In a similar vein, the prison in Santa Teresa is described as 'Una mujer destazada, pero todavía viva' (379), and the moon as 'llena de cicatrices' (502), and in *Estrella distante* Ruiz Tagle's (i.e. Carlos Wieder's) house is said to feel 'como si el anfitrión hubiera amputado trozos de su vivienda' (17). A question then arises: is this fragmented body of reality a vision specific to Latin America? Gabriela Muniz appears to adopt this view when she compares the division of 2666 into five parts to 'las descripciones de cuerpos en partes, semienterrados y lacerados, que abundan en el texto y en la historia latinoamericana' (47).

This way of thinking resonates with Nelly Richard's vision of 'the dismembered landscape of postcoup Chile' (*Insubordination* 1). For Richard, the abuses of the Chilean dictatorship 'sharply marked all Chilean narrative about the national body with images of human remains: of bodies that have not been found, bodies that have not been laid to rest' (1). As noted above, Bolaño's fiction is sceptical both of the possibility of creating whole images of the human (and indeed of discourses of the national body, to which Urrutia Lacroix appeals in his justification of the 1973 coup (*Nocturno* 121)). Nonetheless, there are suggestions in his work that the bodies and fragments that appear in and constitute the world are a particularly Latin American phenomenon: in 2666, the wait to find out the fate of two disappeared women is described as 'una espera cuya columna vertebral era el desamparo, algo muy latinoamericano' (660). Moreover, the illegal rubbish dump where corpses are found in Santa Teresa is called 'El Chile', in a nod to the victims of abuses in the author's country of birth.

The (bodily) fragment has certainly served as an organising figure for several twenty-first-century studies of Latin American culture. Often, the image of the remnant is used to evoke 'counterhegemonic oppositional forces' (Masiello 12), or to point (in the style of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History') towards future forms of social organisation which would not, as the contemporary biopolitical order does, 'insert docile and disciplined bodies into its mechanisms and calculations of power' (Williams, 'Chimbote' 43). Gareth Williams argues in this vein that there is a need for 'a notion of commonality that is grounded in intimacy's and communion's dispersed and scattered interruptions, fissures, fragments, and residues' (*The Other Side* 301). Bolaño's bodily fragments, which are neither docile nor disciplined, disrupt these readings through their apparent *illegibility*. In doing so, they force a re-evaluation of the act of reading itself: instead of a process of deciphering, it might be seen as an act of 'making sense', following Jean-Luc Nancy's ontological use of the latter term. The clearest path of approach to

this new position is through the figure around which the questions of the visibility and legibility of the body are concentrated in Bolaño's work: that of the face.

The Face: Image/Action

Quite what a face is is not as obvious as it might seem. What might be understood by the term has been the subject of extensive discussion, notably by Emmanuel Levinas and Gilles Deleuze. In this section, I will argue that Bolaño's fiction displays a nostalgic desire for the face as site at which the embodied subject becomes visible and might be understood or 'read'. This yearning is indicative of a broader concern with eschatology and destiny (as will be seen, both Levinas' and Deleuze's theories of the face tend toward the theological). However, the scepticism towards the image of the body which is apparent in Bolaño's work applies particularly to the face. This double attitude is, I will suggest, symptomatic of Bolaño's ambivalent relationship with images and representation in a more general sense.

Levinas' conception of the face is challenging: it is not that which is immediately visible on the body of the other, but is rather

before any particular expression and beneath any expression, which is already a countenance given to the self, hiding the nudity of the face ... [it] is not disclosure, but the pure denuding of exposure without defense. (*Philosophical Writings* 167)

In other words, the face is not an image but a figure for organising the visible such that the observer, in Levinas' model, is subject to an unclear ethical demand: 'the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the "Thou shalt not kill"' (167). Two elements of Levinas' thought are worth emphasising here in relation to Bolaño's work: first, that the face is not exclusively human (167), but rather 'a condition for humanization', as Judith Butler has it (141). The desire to understand the world through the face, in search of what Muniz calls 'un humanismo perdido' (46), runs through Bolaño's fiction. The second point to note is that for Levinas, the face, in that it exists prior to expression, is 'in and of itself visitation and transcendence' (*Humanism* 44).

The kind of transcendental eschatology which the face hints at in this reading manifests itself in Bolaño's fiction as a link constantly drawn between the human face and destiny or fate. In *Nocturno de Chile*, Urrutia sees in the face of the critic Farewell 'connotaciones de terror infinito o de terror disparado hacia el infinito, que es, por otra parte, el destino del terror' (63). Farewell

then proceeds to offer a series of obscure prophecies: he says that 'Chile va a cambiar' and 'América va a cambiar', but cannot respond to the narrator's demands for more details on 'el derrotero de la patria' (63–65).⁴ The notion that the face offers an unsettling but unclear vision of the future is taken up in 2666: for instance, when Norton dreams of seeing another woman in the mirror while in Santa Teresa, the woman's facial expressions are described in great detail, and the reader is told that Norton 'tomaba notas muy rápidas de todo lo que sucedía, como si en ello estuviera cifrado su destino' (155). The idea that the face might point towards a moment of reckoning is in fact implicit in the title of 2666, which appears in the earlier novel *Amuleto* as the temporal location of an imagined cemetery, 'un cementerio olvidado debajo de un párpado muerto o nonato' (77). The later novel might then be read as a constantly frustrated search for that unreachable fate – a fate which is hidden in the human face. Of course, the idea that the face imposes an unknowable fate on humanity can be read negatively. This is the approach taken by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: for them, the face is a figure imposed on the body by an 'abstract machine of faciality (*visagéité*)' (emphasis in original) (187), which they identify with 'Christian education' and the capitalist system (191). The face exerts a limiting power on meaning, erasing the 'polyvocality' of the body and trapping it within systems of subjectivity and signification (200). It is therefore, for Deleuze and Guattari, 'a horror story' (187).

Bolaño takes up this idea of the face as narrative or text, or at least as the remnant of one: in the novel *Monsieur Pain*, the ear of the hypnotist Pleumeur-Bodou is seen as 'un trozo de pergamino arrugado' (119). Yet, as noted above, these texts cannot be deciphered: the face remains 'hierático' (*Nocturno* 108) in most instances in Bolaño's work. In the final part of 2666, however, the baroness Von Zumppe meets the wife of a writer from Mainz and observes how as the woman falls silent, 'Su rostro, sin embargo, se convirtió a partir de entonces en un discurso o memorándum de agravios sufridos por la ciudad de Maguncia desde su fundación hasta aquel día' (1025). The face of the other seems here to function as text, although it is notable that the content of this discourse relates not to the subject behind the face, but to 'la ciudad de Maguncia'. This observation is reminiscent of the Levinasian notion that the face is the condition for all discourse (Butler 138), but also of theories which present it as a kind of mask. Indeed, the title of the novel by Archimboldi which is mentioned just before the passage quoted above, *La máscara de cuero*, suggests that face and mask might be indistinguishable. For Deleuze and Guattari, this 'mask' directly affects the meaning of language: facial traits

4 With a different emphasis, Patrick Dove draws attention to the link between body and destiny in *Nocturno de Chile*, noting that the Spanish 'escatología' covers the English terms 'eschatology' and 'scatology' (148).

determine 'The form of the signifier in language' (186), so that our understanding of another's discourse is dependent on an image of that other which is inauthentic.

Bolaño appears to follow Deleuze and Guattari in being particularly sceptical of any notion of 'truth' in the face. In *Nocturno de Chile*, when Urrutia Lacroix tells the literary critic Farewell of the classes on Marxism which he has been giving to Pinochet, Farewell looks at him 'como si de pronto no me conociera o descubriera en mi rostro otro rostro' (114). Farewell recognises here the unreliability of Urrutia Lacroix's visible face, and seems to try to find another one as a better key to understanding the person in front of him. There is a suggestion here that the face in the Levinasian sense is obscured by a visible manifestation. Urrutia Lacroix himself admits that bodily gesture can act as a way of saying nothing (115), and repeatedly tells the reader that while attending María Canales' literary soirées, he reacted to everything simply 'sonriendo beatíficamente' (117). There are echoes of Deleuze and Guattari's argument here, as the image of the face (which the qualifying 'beatíficamente' designates as Christian) attempts to cover over the bodily trauma in the lower levels of María Canales' house.

The untrustworthiness of facial features demonstrated above is repeated in Bolaño's fiction in relation to abstract concepts. In *Estrella distante* Carlos Wieder talks of 'la sonrisa de la patria...una sonrisa parecida a un ojo' (55). Here, the face acts as a figure for the state, and the disturbing transmutability of its features makes it seem inhuman. It is tempting to see here what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'signifying despotic face': the figure of the face characterised by an excess of the 'black holes' of subjectivity, by a 'multiplication of eyes' (202–03). For them, the process of 'visagéification' which is undertaken by Christian ideology applies not only to the body but to the world, so that 'The landscape will be populated with eyes or black holes' (202). This proliferation is, in their thought, 'a figure of destiny', but significantly an 'objective signifying destiny' which effects a capture of the human (203). The substitution of the smile for an eye in Wieder's image of the 'patria' suggests constant surveillance, and a desire on the part of the state to eradicate resistance by enforcing a determined, visible form of subjectivity. This imposition of the face has, consequently, a dehumanising effect: from his aeroplane, Wieder sees Santiago as a 'máscara inconexa, máscara inmóvil' (89), an image which replicates the human but also signifies its absence by suggesting death. In this context, the appearance of the face or its features in the world might seem simply to be a marker of the reduction of human experience to a specific image: that of a social body over which the Chilean dictatorship can exert control.

In 2666 the world is occasionally expressed in similar terms, but as if these

faces might provide the key to the resolution of a mystery. At the end of 'La parte de los crímenes', for example, the politician Azucena Esquivel Plata describes the house of the private detective Loya, who has been investigating the disappearance of a friend for her, as 'como un espejo de Loya o como el autorretrato de Loya, eso sí, un autorretrato inconcluso' (790). Esquivel Plata's desire to be able to read and understand the world in the same way as a human face is left unfulfilled. Moreover, as Donoso Macaya notes, the critics in the novel's first part long for a face-to-face encounter with Archimboldi as a way of achieving a kind of 'sutura total' (140), but do not obtain it. The specific importance of Archimboldi's face will be discussed in the next section, but this desire also applies to the faces of the killers in 'La parte de los crímenes', though they are always either obscured or difficult to remember (654). The only person who is said to have 'seen' their faces is the clairvoyant Florita Almada, but when she is interrogated by the journalist Sergio González, she can only describe them as 'grandes, como hinchadas' (714). Here again, any possibility of interpretation (including, notably, the suggestion of illness by González) is denied. Indeed, González goes as far as to ask himself 'cómo podía juzgar a alguien por su sonrisa o por sus ojos' (701).

Levinas' idea of the ethical demand exerted by the face of the other is conspicuously absent from this way of thinking. Farred suggests that such a face-to-face confrontation in 2666 would be deprived of meaning by neoliberalism's refusal to render death intelligible (the 'impossible closing' of his article's title (702)). Farred compares the situation in Bolaño's novel to the catastrophes of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and asks: 'What value, except for the force of rhetorical affectivity, resides in the face, in the face-to-face confrontation?' (702). I would argue that it is not only the immediate political environment of the novel which deprives such an encounter of value, but also Bolaño's doubts about how the face might be represented, and wariness of the uses of such images. The crisis of representation staged here is not uniquely tied to neoliberalism, though it is interesting to note that in Santa Teresa, 'El Rostro Pálido' is 'una cafetería de moda', another element of the city's violent economy (Bolaño, 2666 771). Moreover, the 'rhetorical affectivity' which Farred identifies as belonging to the face is far from obvious in the novel: the distorted faces which Almada sees speak in a language which is neither English nor Spanish, and which she cannot understand (714–15). There are echoes here of the dilemma posed by Butler: that in order to 'know the precariousness of life that is at stake', it would be necessary to 'hear the face as it speaks in something other than language' (151). Bolaño's fiction offers a rather pessimistic view of the possibility of such an action.

Bolaño's writing also casts particular doubt on the representative potential of mental images of the face. In the story 'El Ojo Silva', the face of 'el Ojo'

disappears from the narrator's memory and becomes 'un rostro de sombras, pero que aún mantenía lo esencial, la memoria de su movimiento, una entidad casi abstracta donde no cabía la quietud' (*Putas asesinas* 14). The abstraction of the image of the face here is reminiscent of W.J.T. Mitchell's observation that the modernist poetic image aspired to be 'pure form or structure' rather than straightforwardly pictorial (25). Mitchell cites as an example of this way of thinking the mantra of the North American poet William Carlos Williams: 'no ideas but in things' (25). Bolaño explicitly questions the notion that the image of the face might bring the 'idea' of subjectivity and the 'thing' of the body together in *Estrella distante*, where the narrator finds in Juan Stein's house an image of Williams dressed in medical gear. He notes, however, that 'el rostro era de Williams, el cuerpo era de otro' (64). What, then, can the image of the face tell us? Bolaño's answer seems to be: little, or little that can be trusted.

This distrust could be seen to form part of a broader attitude towards photographic representation (or, perhaps, representation in general). In *Estrella distante*, Wieder's exhibition of the photographs of the women he has tortured and murdered destroys its audience's capacity to 'read' each other's faces and gestures:

Nos mirábamos y nos reconocíamos, pero en realidad era como si no nos reconociéramos, parecíamos diferentes, parecíamos iguales, odiábamos nuestros rostros, nuestros gestos eran los propios de los sonámbulos o de los idiotas. (98)

The indexicality of the photographic image of the tortured and dismembered body, rather than being a strategy of resistance against oppression or a 'guardian of memory' (Richard, *Margins* 41), is here presented as damaging the viewers' ability to recognise and read the face of the other. The suggestion, it seems, is that the face we act in response to is *not* an image, but rather comes before the image (as Levinas would have it), and that images can disrupt our relation to it. Fandiño suggests that the photographs, by showing dismemberment, destroy the viewers' sense of the 'figura humana': 'el cuerpo humano que ha sido desfigurado pierde su singularidad' (403).

Yet it might be thought that it is the fact of the images themselves, rather than their content, which has this damaging effect. In 2666, the young Hans Reiter takes up this line of thought, musing that appearance in general acts as 'una fuerza de ocupación de la realidad', and that 'El nacionalsocialismo era el reino absoluto de la apariencia' (926). Appearance, in Reiter's thinking, is the site of power: 'Dictaba normas, se revolvía contra sus propias normas [...] dictaba nuevas normas.' This power extends to most spheres of human interaction, so that 'el amor común y corriente [...] es teatro, es decir es apari-

encia' (926). Yet Reiter excludes two specific cases from this rule: his love for his sister Lotte, and the itinerant life of Borís Ansky, which he has experienced through reading Ansky's journal. Reiter's relationships with both of these characters are predicated on absence: he experiences Ansky's 'vagabundo' only through reading, and Lotte is left behind at home, constructing a mental image of her brother as a giant (926). There is a tentative suggestion that the life of the mind, and the act of reading, are the only refuges from the tyranny of appearance.

Butler reflects on this exertion of power by appearances, arguing that the presentation of a face as the personification of evil by the media leads to an 'evacuation of the human through the image' (145). In this sense, Wieder's humanity is preserved by his evasion of direct representation in *Estrella distante*: the narrator states that in a newspaper photograph 'las facciones de Wieder son borrosas' (46), and later, as he searches for him, notes despairingly that it seems 'como si [Wieder] no hubiera existido o no tuviera rostro para ser recordado' (134). I will argue below that this lack of a visible face, or of one that persists as a mental image, is strongly connected to Wieder's identity as artist: similarly, in 2666 Archiboldi has a face which does not easily persist in memory (168).

Gareth Williams reads the lack of definition of Wieder's features as a move to 'disavow the construction of the enemy's true face', which reveals a state of 'melancholic paralysis' in the narrator, an inability to resist the 'temporal despotism that guarantees the return of the fascist state of exception' ('Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis' 138). I would argue, conversely, that both in *Estrella distante* and in Bolaño's other work that 'temporal despotism' is in fact closely associated with, or even exercised by, the face, through the 'evacuation of the human' which Butler identifies. As well as the 'sonrisa de la patria' already mentioned above, a clear example of this can be found early in the novel, where the mad prisoner Norberto, upon seeing Wieder's poems written in the sky, declares that the Second World War has returned to Chile (37). While the narrator describes the faces of the others in the prison camp as a mobile blur, Norberto's remains static and clearly visible (39). This might be read as a projection into the future of Walter Benjamin's conception of allegory, where 'Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head' (qtd. in Avelar 3).

In this context, Wieder's blurry features might be read as the failure of that allegorical project, a suggestion that any attempt to give evil or horror a 'face', to create an image of it that is simultaneously human and also a site of meaning, is unlikely to succeed. The figures of Oido and Odeim in *Nocturno de Chile* might appear to contradict this view, as they can be read as personi-

fictions of hatred (*odio*) and fear (*miedo*). Moreover, Urrutia Lacroix offers the reader a description of Odeim's face as 'una cara corriente en donde apenas predominaban un poco más los rasgos indígenas que los rasgos europeos' (75). There is the shadow of a point about the history of racial oppression in Chile here. However, this personification also allows the narrator to adopt a dismissive tone towards the concepts of hatred and fear ('a fin de cuentas no eran unos caballeros' (119)), and to shift the blame onto them for his involvement with the dictatorship. Nonetheless, the images conjured by the narrator cannot forever hold off the 'tormenta de mierda' with which the novel closes; Urrutia Lacroix's imagined faces cannot contain the human suffering in which he is implicated.

I would therefore argue that Bolaño's literature does not 'look horror in the face', as López-Vicuña suggests (164), but rather questions the validity of that act, and by extension the relationship between the face as image and the 'human' as experience. There are perhaps grounds for viewing Bolaño's literature as performing what Butler sets as the task of cultural criticism: 'to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense' (151). Read in this way, the refusal of Bolaño's work straightforwardly to ascribe faces to the horror it describes reminds the reader of the disturbing *humanity* of that same horror. There is a reversal of the Levinasian position here: it is facelessness, rather than the face, which provides the condition for humanisation.

The questioning of the possibility or meaning of the face-to-face encounter that occurs in Bolaño's fiction extends to the relationship between writer and reader. There is some nostalgia evident in Bolaño's work for an affective model of reading: in the afterword to *Amberes*, dated 'Barcelona, 1980', the author expresses a desire for 'líneas capaces de cogerme el pelo y levantarme cuando mi cuerpo ya no quiera aguantar más' (119). Yet this way of imagining the relationship between writer and reader is, in his later novels, historicised or placed within an extreme political context. In *Estrella distante*, the leader of the 'escritura bárbara' movement which Wieder joins stares out of a photo in a book: '[miraba] fijamente a la cámara y por lo tanto a los ojos del lector', as if trying to hypnotise him or her (141). The sense that the figure of a face-to-face literary encounter can be deceptive is reinforced by the epigraph to *Nocturno de Chile*, which appears as an injunction to the reader: 'Quítese la peluca'. Bolaño nonetheless stated in interview that 'Cuando uno lee está actuando, se pone con esa acción en una tradición, ya no diría literaria sino humana, humanística' (Hernández and Puig 477). He thus asserts the human value of reading while in his own fiction doubting the possibility of 'picturing' the human. Rory O'Bryen suggests that in *Estrella distante* in particular, Bolaño's conception of reading is indebted to Borges's character

of Pierre Menard, who by rewriting chapters of Cervantes' *Don Quijote* word-for-word 'equates the singular act of reading [...] with the power to lay bare the excess of virtual interpretations over the present moment of any concrete enunciation' (O'Bryen 19).⁵ O'Bryen's proposal of reading as 'openness to new understandings that are forever *to come*' (31), rather than as the creation of any fixed (human) images, will find an echo in my concluding section.

In this context, one might see Bolaño's literature as aligned with the Deleuzian project to 'undo' the face, a project which entails 'breaking through the wall of the signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity' (Deleuze and Guattari 208). However, for all its scepticism towards the image of the face, there is in Bolaño's work a nostalgic return to it as a way of understanding the world. As Amalfitano descends into madness in the second part of 2666, his experience of Santa Teresa becomes 'imágenes que contenían en sí toda la orfandad del mundo, fragmentos, fragmentos', and the reader is told that one evening at home 'dibujó un rostro que luego borró y luego se ensimismó con el recuerdo de aquel rostro despedazado' (265). Bolaño's ambivalent attitude to representation is succinctly conveyed here. The images that make up Amalfitano's experience are revealed to be tainted by abstract, verbal concepts ('orfandad') rather than a transparent 'window' onto the world. Yet after having destroyed an image of a face, Amalfitano clings to its remains in his memory. It is not too far-fetched, I would suggest, to see in this passage a model of Bolaño's fiction, where disdain for images that claim to represent the human is matched by nostalgia for a humanist aesthetic. After all, the mad Amalfitano might be said to have a more lucid appreciation of the events in Santa Teresa than many other characters: he ensures that his daughter Rosa escapes the city and its violence. I would thus question Andrew McCann's assertion that Amalfitano presents 'an image of how literary subjectivity founders on its own irrelevance', in that he is 'adrift in a world that has no real use for him' (137). In fact, as will become clear in the following section, literary subjectivity (particularly the body of the writer and its related images) is fragmented and reworked in 2666, but not entirely stripped of its power to alter the world.

How, in light of this double attitude, are we to understand the face in Bolaño's fiction? Levinas' ethical model of the face-to-face encounter at first appears to collapse under the weight of images and their political implications. If Levinas' thought is, as Slavoj Žižek suggests, 'radically anti-biopolitical', then here biopolitics might seem to be triumphant. Yet while Žižek proposes 'the radical anti-Levinasian conclusion' that 'the true ethical step is

5 As O'Bryen notes, in the preface to *Estrella distante* Bolaño (or his narrator) describes writing the novel in the presence of 'el fantasma cada día más vivo de Pierre Menard' (11).

the one BEYOND the face of the other', if Bolaño's fiction takes this step, it does so only with frequent backwards glances towards the 'rostro de sombras' which persists, however unstable, in memory.

The Writer's Sacred Body

Bolaño's hesitant affirmation of the unstable or impure mental image as a means of understanding human experience is strongly tied, I will suggest, to notions of the sacred and to the creative act. The importance of the sacred in 2666 has been discussed by Peter Elmore and Patricia Espinosa, the latter taking as her example of 'la emergencia de lo sagrado' the porn film directed by Robert Rodríguez which appears in 'La parte de Fate' ('Secreto y simulacro'). In the moment of orgasm in the film, the prostitute's body changes: 'los dientes adquirieron una blancura sobrenatural. Luego la carne pareció desprenderse de sus huesos y caer al suelo de aquel burdel anónimo o desvanecerse en el aire' (2666 405). If we read this description, which Espinosa takes to signify 'la transfiguración de la materialidad de su cuerpo' ('Secreto y simulacro'), as an instance of the sacred, then the sacred body is located at a point between the visible and the imaginary. It is useful here to think of Mitchell's argument that the etymological roots of the word 'image' (in Hebrew, Greek and Latin) all originally refer to a 'spiritual' likeness, a list of shared attributes, which particularly in the religious context gradually became confused with a pictorial understanding (31–35).

It is this double sense of the sacred image that Bolaño draws upon in the example above, and it is in this vein that I would propose reading the unstable depictions of characters such as Wieder and Archimboldi. These two figures are linked in their respective novels to a religious understanding of the world: in *Estrella distante*, the poetry that Wieder 'writes' in the sky with his aeroplane echoes the performances of Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, who in his flights over New York wrote phrases such as 'Mi Dios es hambre', 'Mi Dios es pampa', and 'Mi Dios es cáncer' in the sky. Bolaño is thus commenting here on the interaction between religion and art in the *avanzada* of 1970s Chile. Idelber Avelar notes that Zurita's work was praised by Ignacio Valente (real name José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois), the literary critic and Catholic priest on whom the narrator of *Nocturno de Chile* is based. Valente, Avelar writes, 'appropriated Zurita's grandiose resemantization of the Chilean landscape and his design of a Christian pattern of fall and redemption', covering Zurita's poetry 'in a conservative Catholic rhetoric that neutralized the unsettling assemblages of [his] poetic language' (168). Yet Avelar also recognises that Zurita's work with Diamela Eltit in the Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (CADA) itself

enacted an 'offer of an aesthetic ritual that might effect a redemptive, quasi-religious form of restitution' (169). In *Estrella distante*, however, Wieder's quasi-religious art does not offer redemption, but rather presages terror, suggesting a complicity between Christian imagery and the violent exercise of power by the state (a complicity further hinted at by the etymological link between the name Wieder and the German *Widerchrist*, the Antichrist (*Estrella distante* 50)).

Yet paradoxically, Wieder's inhuman acts function, in the narrator's eyes, to confirm his status as mortal and human. When the body of Angélica Garmendia, whom Wieder has kidnapped and murdered, is discovered, it is 'como para probar que Carlos Wieder es un hombre y no un dios' (33). While the uncertainty surrounding Wieder's facial appearance recalls the Old Testament prohibition on seeing the face of God (Exodus 33:20), thus linking artistic creator to divine creator, the corpse here marks out a difference. The implication is that the occlusion of bodies is proper to the divine, so Garmendia's corpse, while it might not be 'deciphered' symbolically, points perversely towards the human.

I have thus far avoided discussing Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of the figure of the *homo sacer* in relation to Bolaño's fiction. This is not to imply that there is nothing to be gained from approaching Agamben's work in this context: both Elmore (270–71) and McCann draw on it in relation to 2666, with McCann proposing that Santa Teresa is the space of the *homo sacer*, the 'disposable body' which 'can be killed with impunity and whose death has no ritual significance' (137). McCann goes on to suggest that 'The novel offers no generic framework than can make sense of the violence, and as a result the very notion of character becomes superfluous' (138). The causal link established in this sentence seems much more appropriate for 'La parte de los crímenes' than for the entire novel: while traditional modes of literary genre and subjectivity are challenged, they are not entirely abandoned. Indeed, McCann himself notes that in the final part, 'La parte de Archimboldi', the reader is presented with 'the myth of the heroic artist who emerges from the apocalypse of history' (138). As for the desire to 'make sense' of the violence, I will suggest in the conclusion that reading Bolaño's work for 'sense' is only possible if one understands 'sense' as pertaining to the field of ontology, rather than to that of signification.

The identification of Archimboldi as a heroic figure is particularly apt if one considers the Classical sense in which a hero was regarded as a semi-divine, sacred figure, as will be discussed below. Remnants of this tradition are also visible in *Nocturno de Chile*, in the story told by Farewell about 'Heldenberg', a proposed mausoleum for heroes in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The project fails, remaining in a fragmentary, unfinished state, but the text at least allows the project's author, a shoemaker, to state the case for 'los

viejos valores [...] lo que quedaba cuando todo desaparecía, [el] crepúsculo de los afanes humanos' (57). Twilight appears here as a figure for how one might picture something at the point of its vanishing: in this case, the idea of transcendent human endeavour. Once again it seems that in 2666 it is the very visibility of the category of the human which is called into question.

To move from this to suggesting that all in 2666 is reduced to 'bare life' is, however, quite a leap. Elmore notes that Archimboldi's original name is shared with a Nazi civil servant who articulated the integration of biological existence into the politics of the Reich (290–91), and who is quoted in Agamben's *Homo sacer* (144–45). Yet the only link that Elmore draws between Agamben's Hans Reiter and Bolaño's is a shared concern for 'el motivo de la salud y la problemática del cuerpo' (291). I would argue that Bolaño's use of Reiter's name in fact signals a desire to reclaim it from biopolitical horror: in 2666, Reiter kills his fellow camp inmate Leo Sammer when the latter confesses to being responsible for the murder of five hundred Jews (960). This act could be read as an affirmation of heroic individual agency in the face of brutal state power.

I do not therefore intend to argue that Archimboldi's body is 'sacred' in the manner proposed by Agamben. A more useful definition is offered by Jean-Luc Nancy, who sees it as the 'absolute excedence [*excédence absolue*] of sense and passion for sense' (*Dis-enclosure* 5). 'Sense', for Nancy, is not meaning as expressed through signifying systems, but an essential aspect of the world, a 'horizon of meaningfulness' prior to signification (James 43). The body, in Nancy's thought, is constantly exposed to this sense, so that it is 'projected outside itself, as it touches on the sense of the world. Bodily experience here is irreducibly fractured or fragmented' (James 48). This last sentence might equally apply to Bolaño's fiction. Nancy proposes his definition of the sacred within his discussion of how Christianity (and, with it, traditional Western notions of the human) deconstructs itself (*Dis-enclosure* 1–13). The figure of Archimboldi, I will suggest, serves a similar function in 2666, as it represents for many characters a (desired) absolute closure of meaning, and yet is presented as an image at the point of dissolution or fragmentation. In this way, Bolaño draws heavily on the tradition of bodily representations of Christ.

Indeed, a web of references to Christian thought runs through the novel. As already noted, Bolaño's concern with destiny hints at themes of Christian eschatology: Elmore suggests that the title of the novel might be read as a mixing of 'El año 2000 y la cifra del Anticristo' (261). In a similar vein, Cabrera sees the novel's five constituent books as analogous to the Pentateuch, and the four critics of its first part as the four evangelists (192). In this context, the critics' desire to see Archimboldi's face can be related to the Catholic doctrine of the beatific vision, which states that the saved will see

God in heaven ('For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12)). Indeed, as a soldier in the Second World War, the young Hans Reiter has a dream in which he has a direct encounter with God ('miró a Dios') and signs his soul over to him in blood (843). It is notable, however, that Reiter/Archimboldi is never explicitly likened to Christ by the narrator; such references are displaced onto other characters. One of these is the Romanian general Entrescu, whose enormous penis is remarked upon by Reiter and his fellow soldier Wilke (864), and who is crucified by his mutinous men as they retreat from Russia. Not much detail is given of the event, other than a question asked by a German soldier: '¿Y eso qué significa?' The answer he receives is simply: 'El general de nuestro cuerpo de ejército' (930). Displaced onto a person noted for his grotesque physical nature, the act of crucifixion loses the power to signify redemption which Christianity ascribes to it.

Conventional interpretation of Christian imagery is similarly subverted in the story of Leo Sammer. Relating a conversation with a town mayor named Tippelkirsch about what to do with his unexpected cargo of Jews, Sammer notes that the mayor's hands made him think of 'las manos de Cristo. Unas manos dignas de ser pintadas' (945). The body which lends itself to Christ-like representation here, that of Tippelkirsch, provides no promise of redemption. It is that of a minor official, a cog in a system of genocidal power. The body of Reiter/Archimboldi, meanwhile, is presented in terms which defy easy visualisation. The first descriptive sentence the narrator offers is 'No parecía un niño sino un alga.' Indeed, the young Reiter is said to evade the symbolic system in which 'el bosque era la metáfora en donde vivían los alemanes' by preferring to explore the bottom of the sea, which the narrator does not propose as a metaphor for anything (797). There is some suggestion in the novel that this lack of an easily representable body is linked to Reiter/Archimboldi's condition as a writer. I use the term 'condition' as Archimboldi can to an extent be seen as an archetype: the homophony of 'Reiter' and 'writer' seems unlikely to be coincidental. The old man who sells Archimboldi his typewriter laments that 'En las entrañas del hombre que escribe *no hay nada*' (983). Rather than simply covering over bodily reality, in this way of thinking the creative act actively erases the body.

Although not erased from the narrative, when Archimboldi's body does eventually appear in the novel's final part, it is immediately presented as fragmentary, and indeed born of fragmentation: the reader is told that 'Su madre era tuerta' (795). In the bath as a child, Reiter observes 'trozos mínimos de piel que navegaban como submarinos hacia alguna parte' (797). This interaction between body and world is reminiscent of Nancy's conception of that relation, and might also lead one to think of the work of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the Italian painter after whom Reiter crafts the latter part of his *nom*

de plume. Arcimboldo's paintings show human faces and busts composed of elements such as fruit, vegetables, fish, or occasionally other human bodies. Carlos Franz suggests that Bolaño's novels are similar to these paintings in that they are 'compuestas de parcialidades y digresiones' (113). He further argues that critical studies of Bolaño's work are likely simply to dissect his texts into their constitutive elements, so that 'Donde hubo un rostro queda solamente la monstruosa mela-cholé del vacío' (114). Inevitably, perhaps, I would contest this construction of text as visual image and critic as vandal. As was argued above, Bolaño's novels already question the ability of the visual image to convey human experience, even if, like Amalfitano, they cling to the memory of that image. Thus while Muniz argues that 'la intención última de Arcimboldo es ver la realidad sólo a través de la figura humana' (46), in 'La parte de Archimboldi' Borís Ansky interprets his paintings as an attack on the visual representation of the human, calling them 'El fin de las apariencias. Arcadia antes del hombre' (917).

The idea that a straightforward visual image of the body is nonetheless the basis for (Christian) eschatology is reinforced when the young Reiter reflects on the young baroness Von Zumpe's relationship with her cousin Hugo Halder. Reiter thinks that Von Zumpe is waiting for 'una vaga, densa redención', 'una redención que olía a espejo' (816). The mention of the mirror links a desire for spiritual plenitude to a (complete) image of the body or face, although the verb 'olía' adds an element of synaesthesia which makes this redemption seem unlikely. Deckard writes that individuals who seek total vision or understanding of events are valorised in 2666, but also recognises that this totality is only ever perceived 'in dismembered form' (359–360). Baroness Von Zumpe is one such individual; another is Amalfitano, who in a dream hears a voice talk of

el triste espejo americano de la riqueza y la pobreza y de las continuas metamorfosis inútiles, el espejo que navega y cuyas velas son el dolor. (264)

This mixing of the concrete and the abstract, along with the idea of shape-shifting, suggests that the mirror of American history will not yield any great revelations. Rather than seeing Bolaño's work as the image of a face or body, then, one might instead read it as that image in the process of disintegration, or as the preface to *Estrella distante* has it, 'espejo y explosión en sí misma' (11). It is not under the keen eye of the critic that 'la imagen se desvanece' in Bolaño's texts (Franz 114); the image presents itself to the reader as its own dissolution.

Nancy views this situation as the inevitable outcome of the fading of the Christian tradition: 'It is possible that, with the body of God, all the entrances of all bodies, all the ideas, images, truths, interpretations of the body, have

disappeared' (*Corpus* 54). Now that the human body is no longer the body of God, it cannot act as an anchor for systems of signification; it is an image, 'but insofar as it is the visibility of the invisible, the plastic burst [*l'éclat plastique*] of spacing' (*Corpus* 56). This notion of the disappearance of the body of God as arbiter of signification appears in 2666: after reading Archimboldi's novel *Bitzius*, Liz Norton runs outside and sees that 'el cielo cuadriculado parecía el rictus de un robot o de un dios hecho a nuestra semejanza' (23). A counterpart to this image of a dead God in human form is offered by the painter Edwin Johns, who sees the driving force behind the world as 'la casualidad', which he describes as 'la otra cara del destino' and as 'Un Dios incomprensible con gestos incomprensibles dirigidos a sus criaturas incomprensibles' (123). In Johns' mode of thought, the human form, divine or not, cannot act within a system of signs.

For Nancy, 'All bodies are signs, just as all signs are (signifying) bodies' (*Corpus* 60). The division between body and sign disappears here, but the 'sense' that the body provides is not a code to be deciphered: the body is rather the place 'where all signification is exhausted' (66), and in the Christian context 'The incarnation is structured as a decorporation' (61). The positing of a divine body as absolute signifier in entails both the emptying out of both divinity and corporality: 'God becomes nothing, and that "something" which He becomes (Christ's body and, by extension, all material bodies or beings) is devoid of all foundation or guarantee of presence' (James 57). In a joke told by a German priest in *Nocturno de Chile*, Bolaño stages a similar attitude to bodily presence in the Christian tradition. Some French archaeologists travel to Rome to tell the Pope that they have found the Holy Sepulchre, with Jesus' corpse inside it. The Pope faints on hearing the news, but a German theologian who is with him calmly responds: 'ah, ¿pero entonces Jesucristo existió realmente?' (95). The notion that both Christianity and literary creation are in fact founded on the absence or occlusion of bodies is further advanced by the typewriter salesman in 2666, who draws a comparison between the face of a famous writer and that of a morgue employee who is struggling to place a corpse into storage, and then tells Archimboldi:

Jesús es la obra maestra. Los ladrones son las obras menores. ¿Por qué están allí? No para realzar la crucifixión, como algunas almas cándidas creen, sino para ocultarla. (989)

Writing is thus construed as an attempt to hide bodily reality, and more broadly, Christianity as the occlusion of its own central, bodily event. Moreover, Archimboldi's body might be said to be Christlike in that it is the body of an archetypal creator which is visualised at the point of its absolute exposure and fragmentation. Something can be seen here of what Nancy

identifies as the dissolution of the human that accompanies the decline of the Christian tradition. The human here is the concept as advanced in the Western humanist tradition: a figure 'vowed to signify, over-signify, insignify [signifier, sursignifier, insignifier] his body' (*Corpus* 55). Something similar clearly occurs in Bolaño's fiction, where images of the human body are constantly fragmented or blurred, and marks on dead bodies cannot be read for meaning. Moreover, the association of the figures of writer and critic (Archimboldi, Wieder, Urrutia Lacroix) with Christianity suggests the impossibility of representations of the human that effect a complete break with historically dominant ideology. Bolaño insistently returns to Christian bodily imagery in the model of artistic creation his fiction presents, even as he demonstrates an intense scepticism towards its uses.

A neutral, all-encompassing vision of the human thus seems impossible. As has been shown, more often than not in Bolaño's work, that which claims to represent the human in fact threatens it, and images of the human frequently also show their own fragility. McCann is undoubtedly right to point out that

universalizing conceptions of the human...underwrite the processes of colonialism and neo-colonialism that threaten particular life-worlds with violence, exploitation, dislocation, or eradication, all of which we readily describe as instances of inhumanity. (135)

However, his conception of 2666 as a journey 'from the Europe of a disembodied, literary subjectivity to the city of bare life' is overly schematic (137). The division which McCann draws between Europe and Latin America does not hold in the face of the textual evidence: as noted above, the description of Toppelkirsch's hands as Christlike in 2666 places a subjectivity inherited from Christian imagery at the service of a system bent on the production (and destruction) of 'bare life'. Klaus Haas, Archimboldi's nephew, challenges the notion of European humanism in rather blunter terms in 'La parte de los crímenes', stating that 'En Europa todos somos puercos' (600). In fact, McCann's opposition of the two continents might be seen to restate the kind of Hegelian Eurocentrism denounced by Enrique Dussel, among others. Moreover, the transformation of Hans Reiter into Benno von Archimboldi can be read as a move from the biopolitical paradigm of Nazi Germany to a form of (literary) subjectivity that, as noted above, is fragmentary rather than wholly disembodied.

The name Benno von Archimboldi, it is worth noting, combines European and Latin American elements: 'Benno' is inspired, Archimboldi insists, by Benito Juárez, not Benito Mussolini, or indeed St Benedict, patron saint of Europe, as his publisher Bubis proposes (1012–13). In short, while it is tempting

to see Santa Teresa as a biopolitical nightmare, a Latin American underside to an outdated dream of European humanism, this relationship cannot be reduced to a simple equation, nor divided along geographic lines.

Hoc est enim corpus meum...

Bolaño's fiction may nonetheless seem to offer a relentlessly bleak view of the world, in which there is no possibility of representing human experience without drifting into archaism or dangerous political territory. Yet Bolaño presents his reader with a small measure of hope in an unexpected place: the act of reading itself. The pitfalls of conceiving this act as a face-to-face encounter were outlined in a previous section and a further example can be found in 2666: as Reiter reads the diaries of Borís Ansky, he worries that he was responsible for Ansky's death, until he dreams of a corpse which, to his relief, bears not Ansky's face but his own (922). The encounter through reading is full of deception and illusion, yet in this 'intimidación letrada y fantasmal' there is real value (Elmore 272). It is, after all, after reading Ansky that Archimboldi begins writing. It is, moreover, by reading one of Archimboldi's novels that Lotte finally 'recognises' her brother, even though his writing offers only an image of 'una naturaleza que poco a poco se iba deshaciendo [...] hasta desaparecer del todo' (1111), and there is no photograph of him on the cover of the book. Here again, the image offered by literature is one already in the process of fragmentation, yet it permits human contact.

Nancy's theory of the touch between writer and reader is a useful way of conceiving this relationship: the contact is 'infinitely diverted, deferred', impossible to visualise, but '*Somewhere*, it takes place' (emphasis in original) (*Corpus* 47). This is the attitude adopted by the critic Pelletier in 2666, who compensates for the group's failure to find Archimboldi in Santa Teresa by reading and re-reading his novels. Pelletier ultimately becomes sure of the writer's presence in the city, and tells Espinoza that what matters is that 'Archimboldi está aquí [...] y nosotros estamos aquí, y esto es lo más cerca que jamás estaremos de él' (207). This is, perhaps, a plea for imagination over representation, and a plea for reading as a means of contact with the human, a means of making 'sense' of the world in the way proposed by Nancy: of understanding the world as 'rapport, relation, address, sending, donation', and that '*world* is not merely the correlative of *sense*, it is structured as *sense*, and reciprocally, *sense* is structured as *world* (Nancy, *Sense* 8). Nancy's insistence on the indeterminacy and co-dependence of these terms underlies both his conception of the body as a space of 'extension and opening' (*Sense* 10), and his rejection of the term 'biopolitics' as creating a misleading dichotomy

between politics as the action of the State (or market) and 'natural life', when that life is always already deeply implicated in technology and the world (*Creation* 94).

It is possible to see Bolaño's fragmented bodies as an eloquent restatement of this vision. Bolaño certainly offers no clear answers to the problem of how one might write well or accurately about human experience, bodily or otherwise, but with respect to reading, things seem different. It may be impossible to interpret the body as a sign or indicator of any hidden truths, but reading is still '*placer y alegría de estar vivo o tristeza de estar vivo*' (2666 983). I would suggest that, rather than as an act of deciphering, the act of reading in Bolaño's work is best conceived of as akin to communion. Not in an orthodox Christian understanding of the term, but rather as Nancy approaches it, where the '*corpus*' of '*Hoc est enim corpus meum*' is "The presentified *this* [*le ceci présentifié*] of the Absent *par excellence*' (*Corpus* 8). Rather than presenting the reader with an aesthetic of the fragment, or the remnants of a shattered communion, as Williams (*The Other Side* 301) proposes, Bolaño's stubbornly illegible bodies offer art as fragment, 'the symbolic itself in the place and instant of its interruption' (Nancy, *Sense* 137); communion and its impossibility.

The 'faith' which Pelletier acquires in Archimboldi's presence through reading is therefore perhaps best described in Nancy's terms, as 'A faith of nothing at all [*Une foi de rien du tout*]' (*Corpus* 89), which acknowledges the body itself as an 'ontological void' (*Corpus* 98). After all, as a forensic scientist in Santa Teresa asks himself, '¿Si no crees en Dios, cómo creer en un pinche libro?' (2666 687). This may be why the images of the body in Bolaño's work are so fragmentary and fragile: like all (Christian) images for Nancy, they are not representation, but '[a] *place opening itself to presence*' (emphasis in original) (*Visitation* 51). Reading is not, then, a question of 'locating' or interpreting the human in Bolaño's work, but simply of being *open* to its presence. The narrator of his short story 'Dentista' goes as far as to claim that 'Uno nunca termina de leer, aunque los libros se acaben, de la misma manera que uno nunca termina de vivir, aunque la muerte sea un hecho cierto' (*Putas* 194). Reading and life are seen as uncontainable, irreducible to closed forms. So Bolaño's offer to his readers is not quite as pessimistic as it might at first seem. The dismantling of the terms of biopolitics, and of the human figure itself, need not be read as a denial of political realities, or an affirmation that there is nothing to be done. Reading offers at least the *possibility* of new relations, new senses of the world.

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